DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 431 523 PS 027 631

AUTHOR Pergjini, Vesna
TITLE The Visual Arts as a Therapeutic Process for Young Children.
PUB DATE 1999-00-00
NOTE 19p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom - Teacher (052)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Art Activities; *Art Therapy; *Childrens Literature; Class Activities; Classroom Techniques; *Coping; Early Childhood Education; Elementary School Students; Preschool Children; Preschool Education; Separation Anxiety; Sibling Relationship

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the use of visual arts activities to help young children cope with separation anxiety and sibling rivalry. Addressed to preschool and elementary school teachers seeking therapeutic classroom activities, the article suggests ways of using children's literature as starting points for drawing activities focused on anxiety issues in the stories. Three fundamentals of the creative process are described: experience, expression, and communication. The experience is the act of viewing a page in a picture book chosen for each topic and having the children relate to it by drawing on their own experiences. The expression will be the child's ability to bring that experience to a visual form in a work of art. Communication is the child's ability to verbalize his or her thoughts and feelings on this creation. The article suggests sample books along with descriptions of the creative process and provides samples of children's art. (JPB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 431 523

THE VISUAL ARTS AS A THERAPEUTIC PROCESS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

Vesna Pergjini

Abstract: As educators of young children we come across many issues children face during a young age. Some of the more common issues four, five and six-year-old children face are initial *separation from the parent* and the *arrival of a sibling* which are often accompanied by feelings of *jealousy, fear*, and *anger*. These anxieties will ultimately find their way in the classroom. This article is designed to give ideas to nursery school and elementary school teachers on dealing with these issues. The visual arts which is considered to be a therapeutic process for many in dealing with life's stressful situations will be the primary approach and accompanied by the use of literature as an introduction to the topic. The fundamentals to the creative process which will be in focus are: *experience, expression,* and *communication*. The *experience* will be the act of viewing a particular page in the picture book chosen for each topic, and being able to relate it by drawing on their own experiences. The *expression* will be the child's ability to bring that experience to a visual form which is a direct work of art, and have this work of art communicate to the viewer. Finally, *communication* will be the child's ability to verbalize her thoughts and feelings on her creation.

Introduction

The human need to express ideas through the arts has existed since the dawn of human history. "From the cave man through the Sunday painter, normal people in ordinary settings have been using art for personally helpful purposes." (Rubin, 1978, p. 206). We each have a need to express our emotions in some manner as a process in the release and taming of our fear and frustration. For most of us, our close relations become our place or comfort zone where we "pour out" our emotions, as a way of coping with life's frustrations.

What if such a place did not exist for us, or may not be sufficient in dealing with our emotions? In what manner do we then proceed to explore the avenue of the much needed self expression during periods of emotional suffering? Well, "imagine a medicine so powerful it could revitalize your spirit, giving you a dose of self-esteem and joyful purpose

PS 027631

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Vesna Pergjini
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

in life. Imagine that this drug has other powers-it could induce a deep meditation, allowing you to forget your pain, and resolve any fears about the future." (Logman, Robin, 1991 p.66). Art is this powerful medicine. It can work towards the healing of our deepest fears and concerns. Self-exploration through art can become for many, a way of coping with situations too difficult to assimilate. It is a place of no judgment and "permitted to view with wide eyes, when often elsewhere this act may be forbidden."(Rubin, Judith A., 1978, p.10).

The same basic idea can be applied with very young children in a early childhood setting. As early childhood educators we have often observed how powerful a medium visual expression can be. In my teaching experience, in many occasions I have observed the child who has situated himself in the art center, completely engaged in the creative process that no amount of chaos occurring around him would distract him from this process. However, once he has chosen to walk away from this area he exhibits an incompetence in engaging in any other activity productively, and is often disruptive to others and shows aggressive behavior very difficult to manage. How can this be interpreted? A minute ago he sat with his crayons and paper in a very serene state, and was productively engrossed in this activity, and now his behavior is series of aggressive acts. According to Kramer , " since the aggressive child sees enemies everywhere and indeed makes himself enemies, he also is in constant need of protection. He is preoccupied with ideas about powerful, well-defended figures, and to create their images is

reassuring...since art is not tied to any set morality, the creative process is not disturbed by the children's delinquent, often cruel imagery." (1977, p.17)

Children are born with an innate awareness and expressiveness in the arts which experiences with visual arts help them retain and develop. The arts can also help them deal with other avenues in their lives such as confrontations on fears they encounter.

The Role of "Art" in Young Children's Lives

"The primary function of art in young children's lives is to objectify feeling so that we can contemplate and understand it." (Langer, 1958, p.p. 4,5,)

The arts are vital to the development of children who can feel as well as think and who are sensitive and creative. "(Feeny, 1991, p 285). Young children want and need to express ideas and messages through many different expressive avenues and media. Through arts experiences children come to feel good about themselves a individuals. Creativity involves disclosing private thoughts, feelings, and ways of perceiving. It provides opportunities for children to explore and manipulate materials and express their feelings and understanding of the world. (Feeny, 1991).

One of art's main functions is that it provides a safe harbor for children, a place where there is a comfort zone from which to begin expression of problems. Drawing from a child's natural interest, to draw and paint is a good place to from which to build. (Douglas, 1996).

Emergence of Normal Artistic Development

Artistic development in the early childhood years has received a significant amount of attention from psychologists, educators, and others concerned with the arts.

It was young children's completely voluntary engagement in the creation of visual images that first attracted attention and inspired documentation.(Thompson, 1995, p.1) The crucial period in children's artistic growth, corresponds to Piaget's preoperational and early concrete operational stages.

There is a generally predictable sequence of events for what most children will do with art media. Normal development in art includes all of the major modes of making: drawing, painting, modeling, and constructing. These stages are: manipulating, forming, naming, representing, containing, experimenting, consolidating, naturalizing, and personalizing and aestheticing.

"Art" is a logical development of the earliest forms of encountering the world through the senses. (Rubin, 1978, p.36, 37). The simple, nonrepresentational character of young children's art and the sequence of children's growth as artists is closely correlated to development. The sophistication of the finished product is determined by the child's strength, motor coordination, and cognitive development.(Feeny, 1991)

Links between Art , Art Therapy, and Art Education

The understanding of "art therapy" is a broad term referring to the understanding and helping a person through art. It includes many dimensions such as the integrative aspects of the creative process itself, as well as the use of art as a tool in the service of dismissal, uncovering, defense, or communication (Rubin, 1978, p17).

Art as a therapeutic process has been supported by the mere fact that art came into being many centuries ago and has survived until today. The therapeutic process is not limited to clinical settings, normal people in ordinary settings have found the process art to be personally satisfying and to a degree therapeutic.(Rubin, 1978, p.206). Art as therapy with young children is more than it's title indicates. "Not only is it a stimulating study of a method of working with disturbed children, but, just as important, it rests on principles basically true for the education of all children. Art therapy is conceived of primarily as a means of supporting the ego, fostering the development of a sense of identity, and promoting maturation in general.." (Kramer, Edith 1971, p. ix, x).

A very important commonality I found among the field among the field of early childhood, art therapy, and art is a child's natural interest to engage in the aesthetic process, his need to express himself, and the nature of a child's spontaneity and eagerness to act on his environment.

Art therapists often base their programs on methods developed by those educators who have influenced the field of art education, however methods are modified according to the

needs of individual children. (Kramer, 1977, p,6) The role of the art therapist and the art instructor, have much in common. "Both are trying to develop the growth of an individual to full ego realization, to come to grips with and master techniques which are intimately bound to the inner psyche." (Pasto, 1962, p, 249) It is ironically true that in the experience of both art therapists and art educators, " the more the emotion, "the more the emotion, the more of himself is poured into a painting or a lump of clay, the greater both the therapeutic value of the work and it's artistic merit." (Gezari, 1967, p.5)

In the attempt to relate art and art therapy, Longman 1996 states "art is a powerful medicine...it can reduce stress.. for some it holds the power to change their lives forever."

Many turn to art to express their deepest fears and concerns. When children can't verbalize their stories, art serves as a nonverbal form of communication. "Art is often defined as a form of communication, self expression, and for symbolic extension of language. The internal process of making the art product encourages an individual to explore the many parts of him of her self." (Douglas, 1996)

The purpose of visual arts as therapy for young children

If we could create something magical when dealing with young children, two elements are to be considered: discipline problems and the children's eagerness. There's a special relationship of childhood to the visual arts as is the nature of childhood itself. "The quality that art brings to a child's life can be helpful... art has the means to present truthful images of the conflicting realities of man's experience." (Kramer, 1979 p.10, 64).

Young children want and need to express ideas and messages through many different expressive avenues. It's crucial that educators provide activities that are meaningful and relevant to the child's life experiences. The creative approach enables children to translate their perceptual world into their drawings, and is used as a means of fostering the development of a sense of identity and promoting maturation in general.

It is my feeling that art in itself will be therapeutic for the child, it does not necessarily need to become part of a therapy program... I think of it as a very healthy art process for healthy children." (Rubin, 1978, p. 208). When feelings are difficult or impossible to put into words, art helps children to learn how to give form to their feelings.

Here lies the role of the classroom teacher. "No one is in a better position to both understand and help children deal with stress through art than a teacher. He knows the child over time, both extensively and intensively. He is in a position to recognize signs of situational stress, by noting variations in a child's usual working style." (Rubin, 1978, p. 210). Therefore, there may be a therapeutic role for the average classroom teacher or art teacher, who can help to prevent emotional difficulties from mushrooming and causing significant problems. This classroom teacher, according to Rubin - possesses the best opportunity to help the "normal" child work out his fears through art.

Given what we know about young children's learning and about their amazing competence to express their visions of themselves and their world, here lies an opportunity for teachers to use this ability children posses in helping them cope with life's stresses. Because young children will often encounter situations of separation, sibling rivalry,

rejection, which are accompanied by feelings of jealousy, anger, fear, etc., the following activities should help you aid children in facing these situations through an alternative form of communication which often opens the door to verbal expression of those anxieties, in this case, visual art is being used as the alternative form of communication.

The Approach

As most of us are aware, a good way to introduce to the children a topic in need of discussion is through literature. The issues we will be dealing with are , *birth of a sibling, and separation* and the often resulting feelings of *jealousy, fear, and anger.* A book on a topic dealing with those issues will be the first activity. A specific page will be in focus for children to analyze and discuss. This will be followed by an art activity through which the children's feelings will continue to be explored. Finally, an opportunity will be given for children to verbalize their thoughts and feelings about their work.

In the attempt to bring the above activities to life, certain fundamentals to the creative process will be in focus and they are: *experience, expression, and communication.* The *experience* will be the act of viewing a particular picture in the picture book chosen for each activity, and being able to relate to it by drawing on their own experiences. The *expression,* will be the child's ability to bring that experience to a visual form which is a direct and often explicit work of art, and have this work of art communicate to the viewer. Finally, *communication* will be the child's ability to verbalize his/her thoughts and feelings on his/her creation.

The group of children who participated in the following activities were four and five-year-olds, however, the same ideas can be practiced with older children just as well.

Situation-Birth of a Sibling

Almost all children have coped at one time or another, for example, with the birth of a sibling, the hospitalization of the mother, and the advent of a new rival which such an event entails. The very strong emotions accompanying such an event are often *jealousy fear and anger,* which are familiar to most children when they feel threatened by a new baby.

The book: Ezra Jack Keats's, *Peter's Chair*

Books about new babies can help children express their fears and realize that their parents still love them but that it is not unusual to feel fearful about a new relationship. Ezra Jack Keats's *Peter's Chair* is a picture book about a boy named Peter and how handles fear and jealousy when he not only gets an unwanted baby sister, but also sees his own furniture painted pink for the new arrival.

The artist Ezra Jack Keats combines collage, paint, and empathy for children's needs and emotions. In *Peter's Chair,* the page the children will discuss and analyze after the reading, is (Fig. 0-1), the page where Peter is peeking into his sister's bedroom as Peter's mom fusses over her. This page comes alive as the lace looks realistic as it cascades from the inside of a bassinet. On that same page, pink wallpaper with large flowers provides the background for the baby sister's room. Illustrations by Keats compliment the jealousy described in the text which is one of the key elements to the activity.

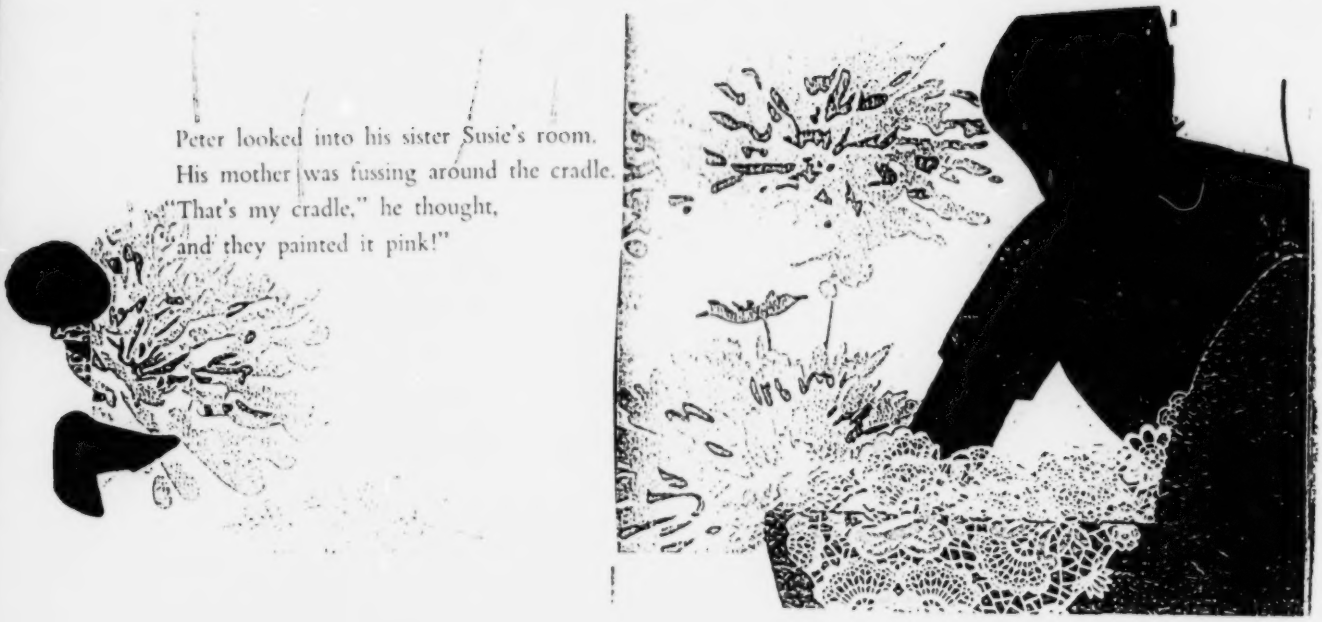
Peter looked into his sister Susie's room.
His mother was fussing around the cradle.
"That's my cradle," he thought,
"and they painted it pink!"

Fig. 0-1. Ezra Jack Keats' *Peter's Chair.*

Experience: I introduced the book *Peter's Chair, by Ezra Jack Keats,* by showing the cover and reading the title, and asked if the children could tell me what they thought the book would be about. some children were familiar with the book and explained briefly that the books is about a boy who didn't want his blue chair painted pink, and that he hated his new sister.

I asked the children if anyone in the group was a big brother or sister. After a few show of hands, I asked the children to tell me a little bit about that experience. Children

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

showed a great interest in responding to this question, and most of the responses dealt with factual information about babies and how they just like to cry and sleep.

After reading the story, I went back to the page in focus for this activity and discussed it with the children. I asked them two questions . *1) What do you think Peter is thinking and feeling right now? 2) How would you feel if you were Peter?.*

This made the children more aware of their feelings and began to touch on their true emotions about this event. Some of the comments touched on the same emotions Peter was feeling about not wanting to give-up his possessions such as a crib or a blanket.

Expression: After listening to the children's responses to the questions on the focus page, I asked them to draw their own picture related to the one in the book.

The children each received 8"x 11" sheet of drawing paper, wax crayons, and felt -tip markers of various colors. They sat at the tables in groups of five and six and began their drawings. Color copies of the page in focus were also provided for the children to refer to if they wished.

Communication:// After the children finished their drawings, they were posted on the wall for them to share with their friends. This was an opportunity for the children to relive their experience on this topic and share them with others and to draw on the emotions connected to the experience.

The children's discussions of the drawings referred to their difficulty in giving up their possessions to the new baby. They also indicated that the children were spending less time with their parents, especially their mother as she was breastfeeding the baby. However,

some of the older children in the group seemed to understand that as we grow we have no use for certain things.

Situation-Separation

Children will often encounter situations of separating from the parents such as when they are dropped off at school, or parents leaving children with a baby-sitter while they go out for the evening. This is often a struggle between grown-ups wanting to spend an evening out and the child who refusing to let them go.

The book: Judith Viorst and Kay Chorao's, *THE GOOD-BYE BOOK*

Books about realistic fiction allow children to identify with characters of their own age who have similar interests and problems. Children like to read about people whom they can understand. This book is about a boy who's feeling sad and angry about staying with a baby-sitter as his parents go out to dinner. He pleads, bargains and threatens to run away if they don't stay home with him. He also tells them that he will *never* -say good-bye.

This story helps the children discover that their problems and desires are not unique and that they are not alone in experiencing certain feelings and situations. It helps stimulate discussion and help children share their feelings of separation.

Experience: I introduced *THE GOOD-BYE BOOK*, to the children by asking them what they see on the cover and what they think the story will be about. I then read the title of the book, the name of the author and illustrator and began to read the story. The children were very quiet and listened carefully. Some laughed during the story, and some appeared

to be concerned-this was clear by their facial expressions. After reading the book I went back to the page in focus (Fig. 0-2). I asked the children the following questions:

1) How do you think the boy is feeling as he is watching his parents get ready to go out and leave him home? 2) Have you ever stayed home with a baby-sitter while your mom and dad went out, and how did that make you feel?

Most of the children could relate to the character in the story and they were very verbal in expressing their thoughts and experiences on the topic of separation.

Expression: After listening to the children's responses to the questions on the focus page, I asked them to draw their own picture of how they felt or would feel if and when they were separated from their parents. The children each received 8" x 11" sheet of drawing paper, wax crayons, and felt-tip markers of various colors. They sat in small groups at the tables and began their artistic expression of the issue.

Fig. 0-2. Judith Viorst and Kay Chorao's, *THE GOOD-BYE BOOK*

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Communication: After the children finished their drawings which was about a fifteen to twenty-minute process, we posted the pictures on the wall in the book area and asked the children to come up and share their drawing with their friends by talking about it.

Some examples of the children's art chosen for this article express their emotions on the subject of separation. Sarah's drawing of a tall building with many windows expresses her experience of staying with a baby-sitter while her mom was out. She sums-up her drawing by stating that she often stays at the top floor of the building with the baby-sitter, (Fig. 0-3) and describes this experience, "I am sad when my mommy leaves me with someone else to watch me, I only want her to watch me and stay with me." Here Sarah is using art to deal with her feelings.

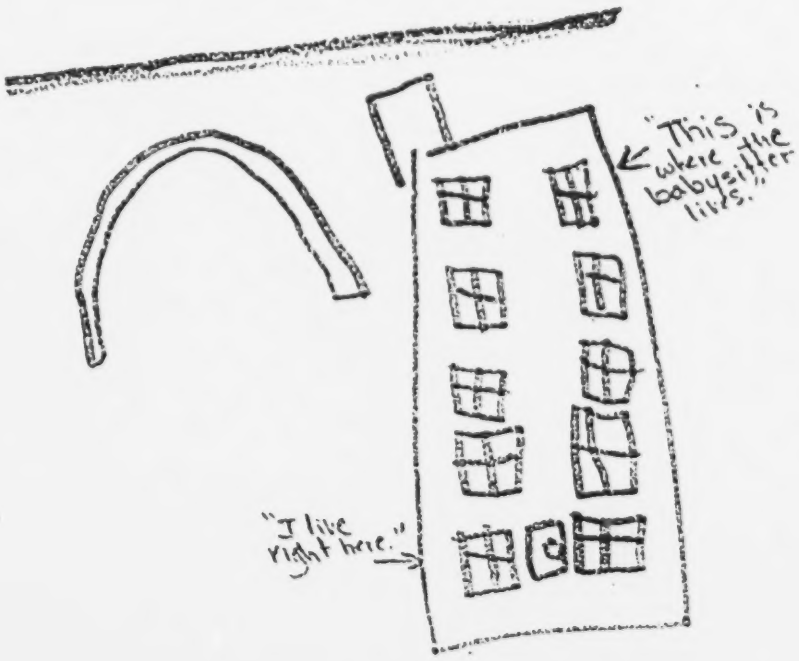

Fig. 0-3. A girl staying at the baby-sitter's apartment while her mom goes out. Marker. Age 5.

Nadia , drew on her experience of watching her mom leave to go to a party and describes it: "I was mad at my mom because she was going to a party, and then my daddy taked care of me."(Fig. 0-4)

Fig. 0-4. A girl staying home with her dad while her mom goes to a party. Marker. Age 4.

Alaya's experience of not having mom join her and her dad as they go to McDonald's expresses her emotions about being separated from her mom. She describes her picture: "I'm angry because mommy is leaving and daddy is taking care of me. I'm angry because daddy is taking me to McDonald's by himself and mommy is not taking me."

Fig. 0-5. A girl going to McDonald's with her dad and not her mom. Pencil. Age

Providing frequent opportunities and art materials available for expression of concerns is essential in enabling children to use art to deal with their emotions. What's also quite important to remember is that teachers must keep an ongoing analysis of children's burning questions and anxieties and making an effort to deal with those issues primarily through the use of art materials. This approach will help children better cope by having questions answered, and by expressing their imagination in a drawing so this concern can be owned by the child himself.. Also knowing that others in the classroom are experiencing the same thing, will help them accept this experience in their life. Children to express their experience on paper and bring their drawing to life. The children's experience is communicated to the viewer, in this case the teacher and their classmates.

References

Douglas, L. (1997). *About Art Therapy With Children.* cyberta a worldnet.att.net. 1-2

Feeny, S. (1991). *Who Am I In The Lives of Children?.* New York: Macmillan Publishing.

Gezari, T. (1967). *Art In Our Classrooms.* New York: Jewish Education Committee Press.

Kramer, E. (1971). *Art As Therapy With Children.* New York: Schocken Books Inc.

Langer, S. K. (1958). *Feeling and Form.* New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

Logman, R. (1990). *Creating Art: Your Rx for health, part 1.* American Artist, 64-72.

Pasto, T.A. (1962). *Art Therapy and Art Instruction.* New York: A.S. Barnes.

Rubin, J. A. (1978). *Child Art Therapy.* New York: Litton Educational Publishing, Inc.

Thompson, C. M. (1995). *The Visual Arts and Early childhood Learning.* Virginia: The National Art Education Association.